

'I cannot mess this up anymore': The experiences of undergraduates who withdraw and start again elsewhere

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This research sought to explore undergraduates' experiences of non-completion and re-uptake, with a particular focus on coping strategies. Five undergraduate students who had left the university system and then re-entered it took part in semi-structured interviews about their feelings and experiences in this context, and these were then analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Six themes emerged that are highlighted by quotations from the students' concerns to illustrate their difficulties in decision-making, coping, identity-development, and social and academic issues. The findings suggest the need for: (i) greater academic and social support for such returning students; (ii) greater academic and social support generally in the first year of study; and (iii) improvements in the ways of promoting higher education and its alternatives to potential and incoming students.

Keywords: Drop-out; non-completion; support services; undergraduates; re-uptake.

SIGNIFICANT ALTERATIONS have taken place in the student experience throughout Higher Education (HE) in the UK in the last 30 years. In the early 1980s it was rare for students to fail to complete a degree that they had begun (Assiter & Gibbs, 2007). Today (2012/13) the figure is 8.6 per cent of the total compared with 7.9 per cent in 2010 (Paton, 2012). But there are huge variations. The Russell Group of universities experience the lowest rates of non-completion (1.4 per cent in 2012) whilst the University of Bolton experienced the highest (45 per cent) (Paton, 2012).

Studies have grouped the causes of student departure into different (overlapping) categories: feelings of being unprepared academically and emotionally, and welfare issues that might include financial difficulties or family responsibilities (Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995). Thus, the reasons for student withdrawal are both multiple and variable in magnitude and it is often difficult to distinguish any one sole reason which leads a particular student to withdraw (Davies & Elias, 2003; Thomas, Adams & Birchenough, 1996).

Nonetheless, student withdrawal need not necessarily mean disaster. Davies and Elias (2003) also encountered people for whom the decision to leave university was a positive one, and Yorke and Longden (2008) found that almost three-quarters of full-time students who had discontinued their study programme had immediately transferred to another one, or intended to do so in the near future.

Despite these figures, little has been done to explore the impact of non-completion on students. Qualitative research on the experiences of withdrawn students has tended to focus on minority groups such as mature students (Quinn et al., 2005), and there seems to be very little (if any) research with students who leave and then return to HE.

If filled, this gap in the literature may undermine the findings from previous research on the causes of student withdrawal. This is because many of the circumstances that predict non-completion might still be present on the second attempt but do not result in withdrawal on the second occasion. By exploring the decisions involved in, and the emotional impact of student withdrawal and re-uptake, we hope to be able to

make recommendations that will ensure greater personal stability through this difficult period.

Our findings are based on qualitative interview data obtained from five students studying at Keele University who had previously withdrawn from another institution. Whilst this may seem rather limited, Keele does have one of the lowest attrition rates (5.1 per cent) in the country (Edds, 2012). Nevertheless, the findings must be interpreted in light of this. Six themes emerged that are highlighted by quotations from the students concerned.

Method

Design

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and later analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2003). These interviews sought to explore the experiences of students who had withdrawn from HE, but who had then chosen to resume their studies at a later date in a different institution. This research sought to clarify these experiences by using face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they enable in-depth exploration of pertinent topics. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews is also advantageous because: (i) they enable researchers to digress from the interview schedule to open up broader avenues for discussion; and (ii) the interviewees have more choice in the topics they want to discuss. This means that the exchange has the potential to produce a richer account of their experiences (see Marks et al., 2011). One-to-one interviews were held with the first author and they lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes.

Pilot

The first interview was used predominantly as a pilot run. Subsequent interviews were conducted in the same manner, but there were alterations in the interview schedule to facilitate a better conversational flow between the participants and the inter-

viewer. The questions remained the same but minor changes were made to the order of the questions.

Participants

Five participants were recruited from Keele University's current student body for the pilot study and the four subsequent interviews. Students were welcome to participate if they had previously withdrawn from any other UK university. These participants are briefly introduced below under their pseudonyms. All five students were in the 18- to 21-year-old age group.

Sophie was studying English with another subject and was in her third year. She had chosen to leave her first institution in the November of her first year as a result of a lack of social and academic support.

Henry was a third-year Social Science student, who had failed to complete his second year of studies at another university. He was originally studying Biology, with plans to later study medicine. Whilst Henry was academically unsuccessful, he explained that it was a lack of motivation that may have resulted in non-completion.

Josh was a third-year Music student. He began his second university following a decision to leave his previous institution, where he was originally studying Engineering. Josh was diagnosed with Seasonal Affective Disorder during his time at the previous university, and felt that his living arrangements in student accommodation did little to alleviate the associated depression. Moreover, he explained that he was unaware of the possibility of changing his accommodation in order to improve his circumstances.

Jenny was a Social Science student, interviewed when she was in her second year at her second university. Jenny decided to leave her Criminology degree at another university. She cited a lack of social support at her first university, and the distance from her home town as important factors in her decision to end her original degree course.

Ellen was a Politics student, in her third year of study. She had previously withdrawn

from Events Management at another institution. Ellen explained that a lack of social support and a course that did not meet her expectations may have influenced her decision to withdraw.

Data collection

Opportunistic and snowball sampling allowed access to students who had experienced university attrition and re-uptake. Both male and female voices were sought and found through these methods. Sampling was conducted through social networking sites and verbally communicating with individuals already known to be suitable for participation. Once five participants had been identified and agreed to take part, no more participants were recruited because of time limitations.

Face-to-face interviews were arranged at the convenience of interviewees in a room within the School of Psychology building. The interviewees were welcomed into the interview room and asked to read through and sign the appropriate consent forms. Each participant was verbally informed of the necessity to audio-record the interviews for later verbatim transcription and analysis. Each participant was interviewed following a previously written interview schedule, but the nature of the interviews was such that not all participants were asked the same questions. Following the recommendations of Smith and Osborne (2003), the interviews followed a circular structure whereby more emotive areas of interest were broached later in discussion, once rapport and trust had been established.

Once transcribed, the interview texts were subjected to IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA was chosen because it focuses on the 'issue of concern' (Marks et al., 2011) which was clearly beneficial for exploring undergraduates' experiences of withdrawal and re-uptake. The aim of IPA is to interpret *experiences* of individuals and understand their psychological worlds.

Tapes were listened to and texts read multiple times by the first author in an

attempt to elicit emergent themes, which were later used to annotate texts and code information provided. The transcripts were approached in isolation from one another in four stages: (1) initial case familiarisation and initial comments; (2) preliminary theme identification; (3) search for theme interconnections; and (4) systematic table of themes drawn. This form of analysis sought not to find laws and generalisations, but rather the narrative that was exclusive to each individual.

Ethics

Ethical guidelines, as prescribed by the British Psychological Society, were adhered to in the planning and implementation of the research. All the participants gave their informed consent before starting their interview, and each participant was aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

Results

Six interconnected themes emerged from analysis of the transcripts concerning the impact of university withdrawal on undergraduate students.

1. Unmet expectations: 'It was nothing like I imagined'.
2. The influence of others: 'They were like... told you so'.
3. The availability – or otherwise – of support services: 'You're out, see ya'.
4. Self-blame adopted by withdrawn students: 'I cannot mess this up anymore'.
5. Making preparations: 'I finally decided what I wanted to do... only after all that'.
6. Identity and belonging: 'You're just seen as a student'.

1. 'It was nothing like I imagined':

Unmet expectations

Premature student withdrawal is often attributed, at least in part, to unmet student expectations. The participants describe several different expectations that had not been met during their first university experience. *'It was odd. Like, it was weird. It was nothing like Keele, it was nothing like I imagined*

it would be' (Sophie, Line 64–65). Sophie is apparently aware of her previously held expectations, but does not elaborate on what was lacking. The result of these expectations being unmet is to compare her own experiences with those of her friends at alternative universities:

'All of my other friends who hadn't chosen to stay at home and had already gone and they were having a great time, and I felt like well, why am I not having a great time at university? Like, you're meant to have a good time and I didn't know anyone else that had dropped out and had a horrible time' (Sophie, Line 144–148).

In this instance, turning to friends who could previously have been able to offer support, would have been unconstructive.

Research suggests that over 85 per cent of students enter HE to improve their job prospects, or to gain a degree of academic value (Round, 2005). Consequently, students expect HE institutions to provide an education that achieves these aims. Ellen began an Events Management course at a university with an overwhelming academic determination: *'The summer before I went I was just so keen on it... I'd read all of my textbooks before I got there'* (Ellen, Line 85–86). However, she became disenchanted by the academic staff who had no academic qualifications of their own:

'None of my lecturers had been to uni, they'd all started in Events and that's how they got into it, so I just sort of thought, well what's the point of me doing this?' (Ellen, Line 96–98).

Ellen explained during her interview that she had always wanted a career in Events Management, and that knowing that a degree was not necessary to succeed in this area may have been a contributing factor to her withdrawal.

Nonetheless, it cannot be concluded that unmet expectations are always synonymous with student attrition. Josh found during his studies at Keele that the new course was not as he had expected; this new course was based on one particular form of music as opposed to an eclectic mix of musical styles.

In spite of this, Josh remained on the course: *'It's just not what I expected when I started, but I decided to carry on anyway, 'cause it got me somewhere'* (Josh, Line 8–9). It seems that initial motivations to study at degree level can be changed when other incentives become more significant.

Whilst unmet expectations alone may not always result in student withdrawal, noticing that there is a void between expectation and reality may be the first step towards premature student withdrawal.

2. *'They were like... told you so':*

The influence of others

Participants often discussed the solitary nature of their decision-making processes, with regards to going to, withdrawing from, and recommencing university studies. Students explained on several occasions that they *'just told'* (Ellen, Line 120; Jenny, Line 56) their parents or tutors of their decision, without having spoken to, or sought guidance from them beforehand. On further discussion, however, this often seemed to be not quite the case. The participants often discussed the indirect influence of their family, schools, friends, and partners at home on their decision making processes before leaving, having left, and in the process of returning to university: *'In a way I still tried, because I was like, 'I just need to get a degree, Dad'll kill me if I don't get a degree''* (Henry, Line 89). The participants were often consciously aware of the influence of their family members, and acted in a way that appeased them: *'My Mum knew exactly why I hated it and she was like, you have to come back, you literally have to come back'* (Sophie, Line 130–131). Whilst it remains important to note that Sophie's Mum did not make the decision without any impetus from Sophie, the influence of family was certainly powerful.

Moreover, the participants were aware of the influence of schools and of school future planning programmes on their decisions regarding university choice:

'Going to the school I was at, they probably wouldn't have even have let me do... I mean,

we didn't do marketing or psychology A-levels at my school; I guess our school didn't see it as proper subjects almost, all our subjects were very traditional, proper... it's not proper is it' (Henry, Line 156–158).

Schools' influences on HE decisions are complex, from giving each student the opportunity to achieve the best university place, to encouraging appropriate academic behaviours and offering suitable A-level choices. In this instance, Henry began a degree in Biomedical Sciences, with a view to moving to medicine, in line with his school's desires and his friends from the same institution. Henry was seemingly aware of these influences during the decision making processes.

Conversely, some influences only become apparent to participants in hindsight, or participants maintained the notion that others have had no influence. This issue seems particularly pertinent when discussing partners from the time:

I made a bit of a mistake and decided that it was a good idea to follow a boyfriend to university, which is why I applied so far away, yeah so I was gonna follow a boyfriend, but then we split up literally just after I put in my UCAS application' (Sophie, Line 47–49).

Sophie goes on to explain that, with hindsight, she should have acted differently. She also appears to adopt some level of self-blame in this matter: *'In hindsight, I made a complete cock-up and what I really should have done was taken a gap year then'* (Sophie, Line 51–52).

This influence was not immediately apparent, but can be seen in hindsight. Other participants discussed others as specifically not attempting to influence them, and yet they appeared to have made decisions with them in mind:

I sort of had the fear, the fear of missing out as well. Rob was going to uni and I knew that if I was sat at home working I'd totally resent him while he was at uni, so he was definitely a big part... not him verbally encouraging me, but him doing that' (Ellen, Line 202–204).

There seems to be some evidence that other individuals have a great influence on the

decisions of students when they are at university, and when choosing to leave. This influence need not result from overt attempts to influence; students may be influenced simply by affiliations. These influences from others do not necessarily result in early withdrawal but if the influences of others are in conflict with the desires of the individual, then there may be instability during decision making processes.

3. 'You're out, see ya': The availability – or otherwise – of support services

Yorke and Longden (2004) suggest that an unsupportive (and sometimes even hostile) academic environment can be a factor in student withdrawal. Participants frequently discussed the importance of a close working relationship with academic staff:

'I remember thinking like half way through October, I'm not going to be able to do this, and like, at Keele you can go to your tutor, you can organise a meeting and say 'look, I've no idea what's going on, can you help me?' Whereas in XXXX, it wasn't like that, no one ever said 'you can come and see me about this'. It was all very much like, if you don't know what you're doing, it's your fault' (Sophie, Line 73–77).

'I reckon there should've been, like people, like some of the tutors and even the students there need to be nicer. At Keele I just hear about Nightline all the time, and 'Do you need support?' and all of those emails come through. At XXXXX there wasn't anything' (Josh, Line 184–188).

All of the participants quickly drew comparisons between their previous university experiences, and Keele, explaining that they preferred Keele because of the 'intimacy' (Jenny, Line 123) with both academic staff and peers:

'People seem to know you more, like your tutors (here) know you more, rather than there, they didn't really. Like even the classes are smaller, the tutorial groups were bigger at XXXXX than they are here. So it's just more intimate and closer, and nicer' (Jenny, Line 120–123).

Furthermore, there may be some correlation between a lack of academic 'intimacy' and a lack of support services for those who are considering, or have already made the decision to leave HE:

'The thing is, the leaving process at XXXXX was so easy, all I had to do was fill out a form and I was gone... 24 hours later, I'd moved out of my block and my accommodation, and I'd just gone' (Sophie, Line 100–102).

In these circumstances, it may be that a personal tutor, for example, would be the last person to know that a student was considering such an action:

'I spoke to my family about it first and then once I'd decided I went to my personal tutor and basically just told her I was leaving' (Jenny, Line 55–56).

Other students suggested, however, that a personal tutor system being implemented or rather, being more effective, may have encouraged greater rationality in their decision making process: *'I think if I had had a personal tutor, I would have still left, but I would have made more informed decisions about leaving'* (Sophie, Line 118–119).

Whilst Sophie feels she may still have left her original institution, Tinto (1993) argues that academic integration is fundamental to student retention, and whilst she may be correct, hind-sight cannot predict whether or not greater integration would have resulted in a final decision to stay in her first course of study.

Ultimately, having decided to leave university, participants felt that they were swiftly removed from the institution with no further counsel or support: *'there was no support'* (Josh, Line 109). Participants seem to experience some dismay over the finality of leaving university: *'I can't remember the exact words but it was only about half a side of writing on the letter; basically just 'you're out, see ya''* (Henry, Line 196–197). This appears to result in some sense of abandonment, which may be catalytic for self-blame experienced by participants.

'I went to counselling in the end because there was no one else I could talk to, I didn't really

need to go to counselling but I needed to talk to someone' (Sophie, Line 115–116).

4. 'I finally decided what I wanted to do... only after all that': Making preparations

The participants discussed at some length the notion of filling in the gaps and making decisions on what to do once their original plans had gone awry. Commonly, students experienced a fear that there would be nothing beyond the present situation.

'I became a care assistant at like, a dementia home and I think people thought that that was gonna be my life, that I was never gonna do anything again other than be a care assistant; and I spent a long time trying to convince... I don't know if I was trying to convince myself that it was fine I'd dropped out' (Sophie, Line 135–138).

However, this sense of fear may have provided motivation to gain experience, in readiness for further study or for future careers. Participants took part in a range of activities in the period of time between their first university and the second, including paid work, voluntary work, travelling and academic preparation.

'I knew that doing marketing and psychology at Keele, there would be a lot of people that had done A-levels in them already, and because I hadn't, I spent a lot of my time kind of trying to swot up' (Henry, Line 206–208).

Moreover, having fully utilised the unexpected 'free' time between universities, students expressed sentiments of increased readiness for university, and more thoroughly considered future prospects.

'I finally decided that Education Studies and English was really what I wanted to do, because I really wanted to be an English teacher... obviously only after all that experience!' (Sophie, Line 172–174).

This seems particularly pertinent when students, upon originally leaving a university, experience some sense of despair about having *'wasted an opportunity'* (Josh, Line 179). Quite aside from wastage, withdrawn students are perhaps more focussed for second study attempts.

5. 'You're just seen as a student':

Identity and belonging

Much theory and research alludes to a well-developed sense of identity and belonging as a key to student retention (e.g. Salzberger-Wittenberg, Henry & Osborne, 1983; Tinto, 1993). Weak academic support, as discussed above, may lead to students feeling somewhat academically excluded; social difficulties may also result in poor integration. Many withdrawn students alluded to social issues bound with accommodation arrangements as a factor in departure, although the difficulties experienced ranged enormously from incompatibility:

I suppose it was just, the types of people weren't my types of people there' (Ellen, Line 200–201),

to victimisation:

'There were two girls I was living with and they ended up hating me, and it got to the point that they left mouldy chicken outside my door, and they knew I was a vegetarian, and I opened my door... it was actually the last straw. I opened my door, saw the mouldy chicken and thought, I'm going, I'm literally leaving' (Sophie, Line 95–98).

Moreover, students describe altering their identities in order to belong; this seemed to be more apparent in their first university attempts, rather than their second:

'At college I was the same as I am now, when I went to uni I was like, I need to tone myself down, just to be more acceptable in society' (Josh, Line 197–199).

These short-term attempts to alter or disguise identity may result in a loss of direction, and of identity itself. Finally, students discussed adjusting to becoming a student, and developing a sense of identity; this may be derived from the university itself, or from its geographical positioning:

'XXXX is part of (the city) and you're seen as just a student, whereas Keele is Keele and it's in its own bubble' (Josh, Line 220–221).

One possible explanation for identity difficulties experienced by withdrawn students is a mismatch between individual characteristics, and university characteristics.

Ultimately, students move from stable social support networks, to unfamiliar living arrangements with unfamiliar faces, with little or no time to adjust to this:

'It was just everything; like a combination of not knowing anyone, the course being really hard and then I just didn't like living away from home either' (Jenny, Line 61–62).

Instability like this may cause students to return to familiarity, and, therefore, home.

6. 'I cannot mess this up anymore':

Self-blame adopted by withdrawn students

Each participant discussed the notion of self-blame on withdrawing from university. These ideas of self-blame tended to result in participants feeling they had failed:

*'I was just like, what the f**k have I done? You know, like I said, at the time it was the end of the world, you know, what have I done?' (Henry, Line 200–201).*

Such self-blame may mean that students are likely to under report institutional issues when they are completing withdrawal forms for universities, or in other HE research. Self-blame may be derived from comparisons with friends who appear to be doing well, comparisons with family members, or with personal expectations of the self:

'The biggest shock was that, I like being organised. Like, I'd planned what I wanted to do for so long; that exact course at that exact uni, and I was so looking forward to it, and I put everything into it, and then I was wrong' (Ellen, Line 163–165).

Notions of self-blame may perhaps be the most significant impact of student withdrawal. Self-blame alters an individual's ability to understand the institutional factors of withdrawal and, therefore, it might alter the credibility of previous research: 'Obviously I didn't tell him that I didn't think the course was worth it' (Ellen, Line 141).

Finally, student's internalisation of blame could result in catastrophising, and as such, an inability to employ effective coping strategies:

'It was the worst time of my life. I had thoughts I really don't want anyone else to have, kind of

thing. And then, so even at the time, my girlfriend, she was about to graduate that year, but I had to restart so that put a lot of pressure on that. So things all started going wrong because I'd buggered up' (Henry, Line 170–174).

Perhaps most concerning, if students are citing personal issues as factors leading to their withdrawal, institutions will be less likely to see any grounds for change.

Discussion

As noted above, this research sought to explore: (a) the perceived causes of non-completion; (b) the emotional impact of making decisions to leave and to re-start; (c) the coping strategies employed; and (d) the differences between the first start and the second university experiences. Analyses of the transcripts identified six inter-connected themes that described the students' difficulties in decision-making, coping, identity-development, and social and academic issues. Whilst these experiences differed greatly between the five students, each one alluded to similar difficulties and employed some form of coping strategy.

Previous research has cited student expectations that are not being met as being responsible, at least in part, for non-completion (Thomas, 2012; Yorke & Longdon, 2004), a notion discussed and largely agreed with by the participants in the present study. The students also discussed the process of applying to university as being guided by their schools or colleges. Such guidance may be linked to an increasing pressure for schools to send students to university (The Sutton Trust, 2007). Indeed, increased managerialism and target-setting may be adding pressure to school teaching staff to encourage students to attend university, students who may be better suited in other forms of education, training or work. The participants in this study often discussed university experiences as being different from what they had expected and, whilst most of them were not able to distinguish between the causes for the differences

between expectation and reality, it is possible that if schools and colleges were able to provide more balanced information, students would approach university better academically and emotionally prepared. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that increased access to course and institutional information can result in lower student attrition for those students set on going to university with the requisite grades (Yorke & Longden, 2007).

The students also discussed the influence of family members on their decision to withdraw from university. Here students may be encouraged to stay on in university programmes if the desires of their family and the university are synonymous – if both groups are keen to make the necessary improvements such that the student feels settled. However, difficulties may lie in the nature of the advice given by family members. Students from families with no experience of university are more likely to withdraw from studies prematurely (Thomas, 2002). This might result from family advice being unintentionally misinformed or inappropriate. Families need more information about Further and Higher Education to help them provide a more supportive decision making environment for students.

Various theorists promote greater involvement (Astin, 1991) or integration (Tinto, 1993) as the key to student retention. The participants discussed their better working relationships with academic staff at Keele than at their previous institutions, and they noted that they felt well supported in academic environments (seminars and workshops), as well as pastorally. Other research also identifies personal tutoring schemes as being effective in supporting first year students in their new environment (Williamson, 2004, cited in Kean, 2010), but it seems essential that these relationships must be personal ones (Chapman, 2003, cited in Simpson, 2006). The students in this study often described not being aware of the fact that they had a personal tutor or any

other support networks at their previous institutions. It seems essential, then, that tutors actively seek working relationships with their students through the first year (Thomas, 2012). Indeed, support for this idea was provided by Thomas and Hixenbaugh (2006) who reported a decreased 'drop-out' rate from 40 per cent to 12 per cent in one year, when new programmes were introduced.

Equally problematic is the apparent lack of support offered to students following their departure from university. One participant discussed seeing a counsellor, not because she felt she needed psychological help, but because she felt she had no one else to discuss these issues with. Moreover, four of five of the participants expressed a sense of relief after the interviews at being offered the chance to 'vent', when they felt they had been given no previous opportunity to do so. Following their decision to leave, the students also felt that they were swiftly removed from the institution without any further counsel or support, which seemed to lead to some dismay over the finality of leaving university. Ultimately, this issue is even more complex, given that responsibility for the provision of any further support does not lie directly in the grasp of any HEA body. New initiatives such as *Student Relaunch* and *Back on Course* offer advice and guidance to early leavers in England and Scotland respectively. However, *Student Relaunch* is dependent on participating HEIs paying annual subscriptions, and *Back on Course* is a pilot project currently funded by the Scottish Funding Council, with its future dependent on securing further funding. Our findings support the need for early leavers to have access to such advice and guidance in the period following their decision to leave, and, if and when they return to study in the same or another HEI.

It may be the case that, having attended one institution and decided to leave, students are better prepared in terms of their original expectations of university lifestyle. However, additional advice services

at both the initial and the new university may also allow students to see more thoroughly what options they have with regards to academic courses, living arrangements and social or work opportunities. Without such additional support services, there is little to help students make more informed decisions about their second university entrance (Thomas, 2012)

Finally, the participants seemed to adopt both behavioural and characterological self-blame behaviours following their decision to leave their first university. Behavioural self-blame refers to guilt or self-conscious negative emotions about individual behaviour. Such behaviours might require psychological support to rectify such issues before students are able to move forward with their study or work. This is normally modifiable as it is based on behaviours, whereas characterological self-blame refers to shame or self-conscious negative emotions about oneself which is normally the result of unchangeable personal characteristics (Tagney & Dearing, 2002). Characterological self-blame may result in self-esteem issues and a belief that past negative experiences were deserved due to personal mistakes. Participants expressed notions of having temporarily behaved in a way that resulted in university withdrawal (Henry), or expressed disbelief at their own inability to make decisions, a belief that appears to have remained to the present day (Ellen). Issues surrounding self-blame as the basis for premature university withdrawal are two-fold: (i) students may struggle psychologically to come to terms with their decisions, and may end up feeling a sense a 'failure'; and (ii) students are much less likely to report institutional issues for attrition when filling out withdrawal paperwork. Attribution theory suggests that individuals attempt to attribute emotion and behaviour more frequently when dealing with negative events (Wong & Weiner, 1981); in accordance with the Learned Helplessness Model, individuals attributing negative outcomes to personal behaviours or characteristics can present greater vulnerability to depression

(Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978; Peterson & Seligman, 1984). This appears to be the case amongst participants who describe this time as *'the worst time of my life'* (Josh, Line 143–144; Henry, Line 170), and more worryingly participants who discussed having *'thoughts I really don't want anyone else to have'* (Henry, Line 170–171).

Once again, we recommend the creation of post-withdrawal support networks for students struggling to make decisions, and to help them come to terms with decisions once made.

Limitations

It is, however, essential when considering these suggestions, to take into account the limitations of the study. First, of course, the discussion is based on the responses of only five students. Next, the methodology used to analyse the data should be considered. IPA is primarily concerned with the exploration of individuals' experiences, and with seeking to interpret underlying psychological processes. Analysis emphasises the individual as the one true expert on their own experiences, and the psychologist as the interpreter (Smith, 1996). In order to try to minimise any personal bias on the part of the researcher, all of the themes were sent back to participants in an email document for checking. In the event, these were returned with only minor typing errors noted. To further ensure integrity, the findings have been illustrated with verbatim quotes from participants, and the participants' own words were used for the theme titles. In this study efforts were made to reach both male and female participants currently in any year of study.

Further research could seek to improve on this study by addressing these issues with larger sample-sizes from a wider range of intuitions across a variety of geographical locations, perhaps using a questionnaire approach based on the findings reported and discussed above.

Reflections (by Lisa Withey)

Note: Lisa Withey graduated with first-class honours in Educational Studies and Psychology in July 2013. The research presented in this article formed the basis for Lisa's final year project in Psychology. Here are her reflections, reported as required in her dissertation.

Reading through the experiences of others in a similar position to myself three years ago was an interesting task. Certainly the transcripts were rich in data useful for coding and the participants were very open to discussing their experiences. Once the interviews were completed, I shared with the participants some of my own experiences that seemed similar to their own, and they often stayed to carry on talking. It seemed apparent that, like myself, they felt they had had no previous opportunities to discuss their experiences. If nothing else, this research was important in giving those students an opportunity that they were previously denied. Themes were constructed with great care to identify issues pertinent to the participants, rather than issues I saw in my own experiences, and the use of member checking was encouraging, given that each participant agreed to all themes I had found, moreover, themes were discussed with my research supervisor to avoid bias in psychological interpretation. Every effort was made throughout the design, implementation and write-up of this research to prevent my own emotional attachment to this topic influencing interviews or interpretation, but it does seem that the experiences of others largely matched my own. Importantly, in reading reports of others prior to this research, I came across Levin (2007) who wrote about the importance of understanding the world beyond HE, which is still worthy of time and effort; and it really seemed to me that participants were almost unaware of this. Achieving a degree remains firmly at the top of their priorities, and whilst this is an excellent goal, I think it is important to note that HE is not right for some people, some of the time (Assiter & Gibbs, 2007).

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